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Monday, Dec. 21, 1998

What Johnny Can't Read

By TAMALA M. EDWARDS; Julie Grace/Chicago, Deborah Fowler/Houston, Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles, and Ann Blackman/Washington

The story was a headshaker. Ruth Sherman, a white Brooklyn, N.Y., elementary school teacher, assigned her class a book called Nappy Hair, about a little girl's proud acceptance of her coily mane, in order to bolster the self-esteem of her black and Latino charges. But some parents, after seeing only a few photocopied pages, assumed the book was a racist put-down and essentially ran Sherman out of the school. Most New Yorkers were torn between amazement at the brouhaha and pity for the children, who have lost a good teacher. But for Trevelyn Jones, book-review editor of the School Library Journal, the real surprise was that the book made it into Sherman's classroom at all. "Many teachers find it easier to stick with the tried and true," she says. "That Sherman even knew about this book is unusual."

Reading, so we're told, is fundamental to a child's education. But trying to get good books--not just the classics but also worthy contemporary works--into young hands is increasingly providing a pit of problems. Spotty teacher training, lack of library assistance (if not lack of libraries themselves) and fear of controversy all help push teachers toward outdated or bland book choices. Those who fight back with verve risk being drummed out of a job or even chased into court. And the old reliable volumes aren't necessarily a refuge either. Such classics as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Catcher in the Rye* are still frequently the object of parental protests.

Robert Calfee, dean of the education school at the University of California at Riverside, often carries a satchel filled with contemporary children's books, the kind that win the prestigious Caldecott or Newbery awards. "Less than 10% of teachers are aware of them or buy them," he observes. According to the National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance (N.C.B.L.A.), 48 states don't require children's literature training for state certification. What's more, the budget cuts of the 1980s left a quarter of all American schools without libraries and many of those remaining manned by untrained volunteers. "I had no idea what I was doing," recalls fifth-grade teacher Marc Waxman of entering the profession five years ago. After walking into a New Jersey classroom that was devoid of books, funding or guidance, he borrowed and bought on his own, wandering up and down the Barnes & Noble aisles "with no idea of what was appropriate or inappropriate, just my judgment."

Some states, such as California, have formal, recommended lists of supplemental reading (in addition to required textbooks) for districts to choose from, but most others leave the decisions solely up to local districts. In some places, novels have largely been shunned in favor of anthologies of excerpts or simply the "drill and kill" of paragraphs followed by questions, a method meant to prepare kids for the almighty state tests. Teachers who are able to wrangle money for literature are advised to choose from lists put out by the

likes of the American Library Association or peruse review journals. But that means extra reading and legwork after long days; often teachers have little time to do more than quickly pick from "kits"--catalogs sent by publishers. Such kits seldom feature nuanced books, says Calfee, especially on subjects such as race or broken homes. "It's a bit more than Dick and Jane, but it's all happy-face stuff," he says. An editor in the children's book industry admits "there are many great books out there" that are not included but argues, "You can't come at Americans with this stuff head on in the classroom."

Especially when the price of creativity can be a slap back at the teacher. For the past three years, the San Jose, Calif., school district has had *Always Running*, a memoir of growing up poor and Hispanic, on an optional list for some college-prep reading. Because of its scenes of drug use, sex and gangs, parents were notified and offered alternative works if need be. But this spring a parent demanded that the book be removed from all schools--ignoring the district's challenge process and taking her case to talk radio. The book survived, but now parents have to sign a consent form for all controversial books.

Some teachers have risked greater confrontation. A Florida woman who teaches social studies to high school seniors is currently in a lawsuit against her school board, seeking the right to use without restrictions an even more contemporary book: *The Starr Report*. In Rhode Island last June eighth-grade English teacher Brian Cabral was verbally attacked by his principal over a vulgarity in *Go Ask Alice*, a 1971 novel dealing with drug addiction. The principal conceded he had not read the whole book, which tends to be the case in most book challenges, and Cabral was ultimately cleared in a committee review. "If the kids had not been supportive, I would have left teaching," he says. "It was worse than I could have imagined." Notes Patricia Graham, former dean of Harvard's school of education: "A lot of teachers say, 'I'm not going to deal with this; we'll just stick to Robinson Crusoe.'"

Supporters of more contemporary and challenging books say they energize kids and spur discussions about social realities that may already be affecting the classroom or community. Yet where should the line be drawn? Debbi Grizzi, a Lincoln, Neb., mother, had to lift her jaw off the counter when she opened her 12-year-old's backpack and discovered *A Need to Kill*, a graphic account of a child killer who fantasizes and masturbates about murdering boys. "There has to be some check on what children are reading," she argues. Houston eighth-grade English teacher Susan Duhon agrees that teachers must be sensitive to the wishes of the community. "I am a team player and a public servant," says Duhon, who 10 years ago enraged some parents when she used adult novels from a list by the National Council of Teachers of English for a book fair. Now, she says, her classroom selections come mostly from "dead white men," but it's a choice she vigorously defends. Says Duhon: "If I can teach literature through the classics, why not? These are books my parents love."

Yet even the books parents love are gradually losing their universality. Mary Brigid Barrett, author and N.C.B.L.A. president, says she always has to stop and explain *Charlotte's Web* to teaching students, since half of them tend not to know it. *Curious George* too draws curious stares; many are familiar with the little monkey but not his tale. "What is shocking is that nobody in education is willing to say there are writers, poems, essays and books all Americans should read," says education expert Diane Ravich, editor of *The American Reader*. And less incentive for adventurous teachers to look for new ones.

--With reporting by Julie Grace/Chicago, Deborah Fowler/Houston, Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles, and Ann Blackman/Washington



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